

ALICE MILLER

the most significant thinker in psychiatry today

Interviewed by Diane Connors

"I describe pictures of people, use histories of them as mirrors. And then many come and say, 'This is exactly what I felt all my life but couldn't say.' I don't want to be a guru. I don't want people to believe me. I only encourage them to take their own experience seriously."

Alice Miller's stories portray abused and silenced children who later become destructive to themselves and to others. Adolf Hitler, says Miller, was such a child. Constantly mistreated by his father, emotionally abandoned by his mother, he learned only cruelty; he learned to be obedient and to accept daily punishments with unquestioning compliance. After years, he took revenge. As an adult he once said, "It gives us a very special, secret pleasure to see how unaware people are of what is really happening to them."

Miller, famed throughout Europe, wrote of Hitler's childhood in *For Your Own Good: Hidden Cruelty in Child-Rearing and the Roots of Violence*. In the same work she lets Christiane F. tell her own story: "I had trouble telling the letters H and K apart. One evening my mother was taking great pains to explain the difference to me. I could scarcely pay attention to what she was saying because I noticed my father getting more and more furious. I always knew what was going to happen. He went out and got the hand broom and gave me a trouncing. Now I was supposed to tell the difference between H, and K. Of course by that time I didn't know anything anymore, so I got another licking and was sent to bed."

Christiane went into the street and became a drug addict.

"We do not need books about psychology in order to learn to respect our children," Miller says. "What we need is a total revision of the methods of child rearing and our traditional view about it." The way we were treated as small children is the way we treat ourselves the rest of our lives: with cruelty or with tenderness and protection. We often impose our most agonizing suffering upon ourselves and, later, on our children.

In 1979 Miller's first book, *The Drama of the Gifted Child*, was published in Germany. First titled *Prisoners of Childhood*, its three short essays described how parents project their feelings, ideas, and dreams upon their children. To survive and be loved, a child learns to obey. In repressing his or her feelings, the child stifles attempts to be herself or himself. The result, said Miller, is all too often depression, ebbing of vitality, the loss of self. *The Drama* drew wide audiences in Europe and then the United States. Two more books quickly followed: *For Your Own Good* and *Thou Shalt Not Be Aware* continued to focus on the child but moved into deeper studies of child abuse, attitudes of child rearing, psychological theory, and treatment.

Last summer Miller published *Pictures of a Childhood*, a collection of 66 water-color paintings, it represents a small fraction of her art. As she tells us in the book's introduction, Miller started to paint 14 years ago. "Five years after I began painting spontaneously, I started writing books. This never would have been possible without the inner liberation painting has given me. The more freedom I got playing with colors, the more I had to question what I had learned twenty years ago.

"It wasn't until I wrote my books that I found out just how hostile society was toward children," she says. "I have come to realize that hostility toward children is to be found in countless forms, not only in death camps but throughout all levels of society and in every intellectual discipline -- even in most schools of therapy."

Born in Poland in 1923, Miller was educated and lives in Switzerland. She studied philosophy, sociology, and psychology and took her doctorate in 1953. She completed her psychoanalytic training in Zurich, and as a practicing psychoanalyst she has been involved in teaching and training for more than 20 years.

As her writing progressed, Miller's view of the child became more and more opposed to that of traditional Freudian

theory. Miller at first dedicated *Thou Shalt Not Be Aware* to Freud on the one hundred twenty-fifth anniversary of his birth. "His discoveries of the survival of childhood experiences in the adult unconscious and the phenomena of repression have influenced my life and way of thinking," she says. "But I came to different conclusions than Freud when I could no longer deny what I learned from my patients about the repression of child abuse."

Today Miller has departed from the traditional analytic approach to treatment and from Freudian theory. Early in his work Freud believed that the root of neurosis was actual trauma, often violent and sexual in nature, that had been repressed in childhood. Later he altered his view, deciding that the child is by no means innocent but is born with drives that are sexual and destructive in nature.

Why has Freud's Oedipus complex lasted so long? Miller asks. "Because in the Freudian view the parents, not the child, are innocent. The Freudian view fits society; it overlooks in Oedipus the abused child and sees him with incestuous wishes that lead to his killing his father, marrying his mother, and ultimately blinding himself."

Traditional analysis, says Miller, duplicates the parent-child relationship. with the conventional analyst in the position of power. But there is hope in therapy if the therapist is a true advocate of the patient. Respect for the child within the patient and his discovery of his real history must play a role in the treatment process. The child undergoes a long inner struggle "between the fear of losing the person he loves if he remains true to himself, and panic at the prospect of losing himself if he has to deny who he is. A child cannot resolve a conflict of this nature and is forced to conform because he cannot survive by himself. Therapy should not repeat this condition."

Miller uses the phrase poisonous pedagogy to describe what we inflict on children "for their own good" out of our hypocrisy and ignorance. She perceives that we instill humiliation, shame, fear, and guilt as we are "training" children. By encouraging conformity, suppressing curiosity and emotions, a parent reduces a child's ability to make crucial perceptions in later life. "Children are tolerant. They learn intolerance from us."

While Miller's work is ignored or attacked by the orthodoxy, farsighted therapists often hail it as monumental in its analysis of hidden cruelty and the roots of violence. Anthropologist Ashley Montagu stated that *Thou Shalt Not Be Aware* "will undoubtedly prove to be a watershed in the history of psychoanalysis."

"My antipedagogical position is not directed against a specific type of pedagogy," Miller notes, "but against pedagogical ideology in general, which can be found also in the permissive theories." She fears that as a consequence of adults' arrogant attitudes -- including "permissive" attitudes - toward children's feelings, children are trained to be accommodating. But their own voices will be silenced, and their awareness killed. And more blind and arrogant adults will be the result.

Interviewer Diane Connors, also a psychotherapist, visited Miller in her apartment near Zurich. Small in stature, Miller radiates a sense of both caution and fragility, and a clear-eyed, unflinching commitment to what she is saying, and an awareness of society's resistance to her work.

OMNI When did you realize respect for the child would be your central focus?

Miller I looked from the beginning, I think from my childhood, for the answer to why people behave in such an irrational way. I always needed to understand and make things clear. I didn't get much information from my mother, who would say, "It is this way; it is so and so and so." She never gave me an explanation if I asked. I was very alone as a child.

Maybe I was five years old when I saw a woman with a child. The girl was three or four. She fell down and was hurt. Her mother, who was talking to another mother, slapped the child just because she came crying with bloody knees. I remember my question then: "This child is punished twice: first by falling down and then by the mother. Why does she punish the child? She is not guilty -- she needs her mother's help, not punishment."

OMNI Why do some professionals deny what you're saying?

Miller Because they are not allowed to face reality. You know, it was interesting. The first time I talked on these ideas was when I spoke to about three hundred analysts on the narcissism of psychoanalysts. They were so surprised, because it was very unusual to hear a colleague side with the child. First they reacted naturally, were just grateful and did not show much resistance to their feelings. They thanked me and said, "But how did you know it was my life you described?" And I said, "It was my own life I described." Many men had tears in their eyes. Then I tried to publish this article in a German professional review, but the editors refused it. Resistance was already established. They sent it back because they had to see everything as Freud would have; otherwise it is frightening or dangerous. The International Analytic Society published it in the International Journal of Psychoanalysis. But the German review, *Psyche*, did not. It was too provoking for the Germans.

OMNI What were the provocative issues?

Miller That neurosis and psychosis result from repressed feelings that are a reaction to trauma. The child's anger and all the other feelings we don't like are reactions to child abuse.

Today we know that we have a lot of child abuse. It was silenced before. The child must repress the memory of this abuse and deny the pain in order to survive; otherwise he would be killed by the pain.

OMNI Might this happen so early in the child's development that he lacks words, understanding, or permission to express the pain?

Miller The words have to be found. A good therapy should help the patient evolve from a "silent child" to a "talking child." The child couldn't have found the words if the trauma were too early, or the environment too hostile. But now, in therapy, if you have a therapist who is really your advocate, your conscious witness for when you experienced your trauma for the first time, then you become a talking child. Therapy exists to help you find the words to tell your mother or father how you felt at that time when they hurt you or how you felt when you could not talk -- even that.

OMNI What do you mean by advocate?

Miller One who sides with the child. Always. The therapist must not say the parents were disturbed but well-meaning, because he is then siding with the grown-ups. If the child thinks that the parents who behaved so strangely and humiliated him were well-meaning, he cannot feel his pain, and he sympathizes instead with his parents. It is a crime to beat a child because the beating is a damage, and you can never change this reality. A battered child feels humiliated, confused, isolated; and he is made to feel guilty because he is told he is bad. We are afraid to say that child abuse is a crime because we want to protect the parent from his guilt. But we really fail to help them when we support their blindness, because in this way we also betray the child in the parent.

OMNI How do you deal with pain in the healing process?

Miller Pain is the way to the truth. By denying that you were unloved as a child, you spare yourself some pain, but you are not with your own truth. And throughout your whole life you'll try to earn love. In therapy, avoiding pain causes blockage. Yet nobody can confront being neglected or hated without feeling guilty. "It is my fault that my mother is cruel," he thinks. "I made my mother furious; what can I do to make her loving?"

So he will continue trying to make her love him. The guilt is really protection against the terrible realization that you are fated to have a mother who cannot love. This is much more painful than to think "Oh, she is a good mother, it's only me who's bad." Because then you can try to do something to get love. But it's not true; you cannot earn love. And feeling guilty for what has been done to you only supports your blindness and your neurosis.

There are some treatments where the patients cry a lot - they really suffer - but do not talk. I saw a videocassette where for one hour the patient relived the pain of birth but didn't talk about it. Only later did he report on what he had felt. But in my opinion it is important to speak, to verbalize, during the experience of pain. Even if the patient felt as if he were in the womb, he should try to talk to the mother and tell her how he feels.

The link between feelings and their verbal expression is crucial to the healing process. But he can't do it without assistance; he has to know someone is there who understands how he feels, who supports and confirms him. If a child has been molested and the therapist doesn't deny this fact, many things can open up in the patient. The therapist must not preach forgiveness, or the patient will repress the pain. He won't change, and the repressed rage will look for a scapegoat.

OMNI Do you think the child has no history, that a child is born into the world like a tabula rasa on which experience inscribes his or her character?

Miller No, I don't. The child comes from the womb with his or her history as experienced in the womb. But he doesn't come with projections. He is born innocent and ready to love. And the child can love - much more than we grown-ups can. This idea of the child as a loving being meets so much resistance because we learned to defend our parents and to blame ourselves for everything they have done.

OMNI In *The Drama* you connect repressed feeling with loss of vitality. Was that your experience here?

Miller Yes, experiencing the pain of my life gave me back my vitality. First pain, then vitality. The price of repressing feelings is depression. I also had to resist the usual way of learning. If you are forced to do something, you cannot have fun. But for me, having fun is the first condition of creativity. I learned when I played with color. But I resisted learning about color by reading theories from books.

For me painting, dreaming, and writing have something in common. I paint as I dream. I have many impulses and associations. I never have a plan, a concept of what I want to do. I do have a concept sometimes, but I cannot realize it because while painting, I start to dream of something else and I forget my plan. In the beginning I had a sort of narrative style. I wanted to tell a story, or a story in myself wanted to be told. Now it's more like needing this color, this form, this line. It's improvisation. I'd say I am painting like a jazz musician.

I don't want to make a masterpiece, or even good pictures. Fortunately, I don't need to sell my paintings. I'm only compelled to work further and further into what is true. Sometimes I destroy my paintings. I change and change them, even though they may have been nicer before. In the end I'm happy because it's what I wanted to say. I don't care if someone says it's good or not. In painting I feel absolutely free. I have my palette, my white paper; and nobody can tell me what is right or wrong.

OMNI Does response to your work differ from country to country?

Miller Yes. The Scandinavian lands, Holland, and the United States are most liberal and open. Most of my books are sold in Germany, but many Germans are still very much formed by the poisonous pedagogy. Swiss people, too. So many are not allowed to criticize parents or see the poison of their upbringing. These people say my work describes the education of the nineteenth century. They don't realize that they still live according to nineteenth-century values.

This response is also a reaction to Hitler's time. The denial of Hitler is so deep that the German cannot learn from his history. As a child, Hitler had no witness. His father destroyed everything his son did. He could never tell anyone the pains he was suffering. In Sweden they made a play, "Hitler's Childhood," from a chapter in my book. The story shows how that child looked for contact, longed for a glance, but was constantly treated like a dog.

A reaction similar to Germany's also comes from Japan, but also from Japan come reactions from people who already have become aware. Their awareness is not damaged by theories like the Freudian drive theory, so these Japanese can face what I write, use it in their reality. They can realize the ever-present child abuse, and they can really help.

Behind every act of violence there is a history. A history of being molested, a history of denying. The denial is a law governing us, but it is ignored by society and still not investigated by the professionals. Yet it holds the keys to our understanding why pure nonsense can be still held in high esteem in our culture, such nonsense as Sigmund Freud's idea that a child would invent traumas.

OMNI Are there cultures that have a different attitude toward parenting?

Miller Despite variations in cultures, abuse is found in almost every one. But there are some that are different. For instance, there are people on an island of Malaysia called Senoi who have a nonviolent culture. They talk with their children about dreams each morning. They never have had war. Our culture is so violent because as children we learned not to feel.

OMNI Can therapy effect a change?

Miller Yes, but only if the therapy will come to the pain, which is blocked in our feelings of guilt. The idea "I was guilty for what happened to me" is a blockage. Since I discovered that Freud's drive theory not accidentally but necessarily conceals the reality of child abuse, I have looked for a new form of psychotherapy, an effective therapy to be based on the whole knowledge of child abuse available to us today. I finally found it, and I will describe this concept in my next book. This therapy enables the patient and the therapist to systematically come in touch with their traumas and pain -- step by step without suddenly breaking the defenses, without moralistic and pedagogical attitudes, and without bringing people into dangerous states where they experience chaotic feelings and are stuck with them.

One can find plenty of irresponsible and harmful techniques and mixtures of techniques that don't provide a systematic confrontation with the past. Some leave people with different mystical offerings or with their unresolved pain. These patients are victims first of child abuse and finally of therapy abuse. And they try to "help" themselves by taking drugs, joining sects or gurus, or looking for other ways of denying reality and killing pain. Political activity can be one of these ways.

OMNI What advice would you give today to a therapist in training?

Miller First try to discover your own childhood, then take the experience seriously. Listen to the patient and not to any theory; with your theory you are not free to listen. Forget it. Do not analyze the patient like an object. Try to feel, and help the patient to feel instead of talking to the patient about the feelings of others.

The child needs fantasies to survive, to not suffer. Believe what the patient tells you, and don't forget that repressed reality is always worse than a fantasy. No one invents traumas, because we don't need traumas in order to survive. But neither do we need their denial. Some of us pay with severe symptoms for this denial. Study the history of childhood. Therapy has to open you as well as the patient for feeling in your whole life. It has to awaken you from a sleep.

It is tragic to go to therapy and find, instead of help, confusion. I have a letter from a seventy-nine-year-old woman saying that for "forty years of my life I went to psychoanalysis. I saw eight analysts. But for the first time, after reading your book, I didn't feel guilty for what happened to me. I always tried, and the analysts were nice people. They wanted to help me. But they never doubted that my parents were good to me.

I am so grateful now that I don't feel guilty since I read your books. I now see how terribly they abused me. It was first my parents and then my analysts who made me feel wrong and guilty." This insight came from a seventy-nine-year-old woman! Then she quoted from the last line of *For Your Own Good*: "For the human spirit is virtually indestructible, and its ability to rise from the ashes remains as long as the body draws breath."

OMNI Does TV violence affect children?

Miller Children who have really been loved and protected will not be interested in these films and shows and will not be in danger. But the child who was hurt and humiliated -- maybe at school, not necessarily by his parents - is looking for outcomes, for material; he is looking for an object to hate and on whom to take revenge. Of course there are people who make a business of the suffering of children. But the violence doesn't come from TV films. Its sources are deeper. Protected and loved children cannot become murderers. It is impossible to find one person who was not beaten who beats a child.

OMNI Why does violence beget itself through the generations?

Miller If you go back you can see that the abuser was always abused. But in most cases you will not hear it from him or her, because there is so much denial. If you go to a prison and ask a murderer, "How was your childhood?" he will say, "Oh, it was not so bad. My father was severe and he punished me because I was so bad. And my mother was a nice woman." This is the problem: You can't find the truth because the person, the murderer himself, will prevent you from seeing his cruel childhood as it actually was. Because he cannot bear that pain, he kills innocent people instead of feeling the pain of his childhood.

OMNI Do you think a child can experience abuse in the womb?

Miller Of course. Each child has its own experience; some experience real martyrdom. There was a child born with three ulcers. It died. The mother was fifteen years old. She was beaten during pregnancy as well, and she used drugs. Nobody knows what a child, even in the womb, has to go through. We are so ignorant, and we refuse to know.

You heard about the McMartin School in Los Angeles? At this day-care center of more than three hundred children it was charged that many of them were sexually molested. For seven months attorneys asked the children what happened to them there. This questioning was torture for the children. Some of them reported that they helped kill a baby. The grown-ups found this wasn't true, so they called the children liars. Eventually charges were dropped against five of the seven accused molesters. But obviously this was a symbolic way to say, "When I agreed to be sexually abused I killed the child in myself."

I want to show how society reacts to children's reports. Abuse means killing the soul of a child. We cannot understand the child's symbolic language, so we say the child is lying. Then abusing teachers go free, and we think that everything is legally correct. The problem is that children protect the abuser. Sometimes the abuser is exchanged for another person in their reports. They perhaps say, "I'm afraid of the mailman because he was bad to me."

And the parents know that the mailman had no body contact with their child. But behind the "made-up" story lurks a father or uncle. The lie functions to protect the loved person but at the same time expresses anxieties. Grown-ups say that these are children who invent stories. But the story is not invented; a real event happened.

OMNI Can society learn to understand the child's language?

Miller I hope so. Otherwise we will commit a mass suicide with the help of technology. The child's language is often very clear, but we refuse to listen to it. Children can endure terrible abuse and cruelty from the first moment of their lives, thanks to the technology in hospitals. The abuse is stored up in the mind, and it can remain active the whole life. Therefore, a mother maltreating her small baby can repeat exactly what happened to her without having any knowledge, any conscious memories. But the stored-up memories in her body will compel her to repeat the same trauma.

Unless a child receives the warm arms of a person who will console him and tell him with his arms that the shock of birth is over, this child will wait his whole life expecting a repetition of this shock. One of the first lessons is that you are alone, in a dangerous place, and nobody sees your pain. But this situation can easily be changed when we acknowledge the newborn as a feeling and highly sensitive person.

Very often the child comes into life after a struggle, and we don't realize that he needs consolation and the arms of a mother. We give him medication, hospitals, and high technology instead. And we think it is good for the child - only because we had the same experience years ago and think it is usual. What really happens in the psyche of a newborn is absolutely not interesting to most people. That is why I am giving you this interview.

OMNI What would you like to do now?

Miller I would like to support people who are confronting child abuse. I received a letter from a child therapist in California. He was a consultant for a school. A girl told him stories of a "hot box," a tiny windowless closet in which

the children were locked up as punishment. He believed her, investigated, and, when he wrote a report about it, was fired. But he kept on investigating and found these hot boxes used in other schools.

Newspapers reported about the case, and his voice and experience were noticed. He thanked me because he felt supported by my books. This shows one person can make people aware that methods they never questioned before are, in fact, damaging. The single advocate of a child can save a life; advocates say a crime is a crime; they don't conceal the truth by calling it ambivalent parent's love.

An advocate can help keep a child from becoming a criminal. The child learns from an enlightened witness to recognize cruelty, to reject it, to defend himself against it, so as not to perpetuate it. Experiments have conclusively proven that no one learns anything by punishment. What you learn is how to avoid punishment by lies and how to punish a child twenty to thirty years later. People continue to believe, however, that punishment can be effective.

OMNI Can you change this belief?

Miller I hope so, at least partly. My life and work concentrate on the problem of child abuse and on the question of how I can transmit what I have learned about it to professionals, parents, and people responsible for law. It's not easy, because most people learned from the beginning of their lives that the child has to be spanked in order to become as good, human, honest, tolerant as the teachers, parents, ministers, and others around them believe that they are.

In England, where I've given some radio shows, interviewers often say, "You talk about the serious forms of violence and brutality in families, but there are also other forms -- spankings, caning, shouting at a child." The interviewers claim these forms of exercising power are harmless and not serious, and they argue that although they were often spanked as children, they didn't become an Adolf Hitler.

I see it as my task to repeat that each kind of beating, caning, and spanking of a child is a humiliation and is a serious damage for his whole life. A child can avoid becoming a criminal if he has the chance in childhood to meet at least one person who is not cruel to him, who maybe even likes him or understands him. The experience of love, compassion, or sympathy would help him to recognize cruelty for what it is.

Children who lack this experience because there is no conscious witness will see cruelty as a normal way of treating children and will continue with this burden. They will become as Hitler, Eichmann, [Rudolf] Hoss, and all the millions of their followers who in their childhoods never found anything but cruelty.

OMNI What about the milder forms of cruelty, such as spanking, shouting, and verbal humiliation?

Miller The tragedy is that people treated this way - even if they don't become like Hitler - pretend that this kind of treatment was necessary. They reserve the right to do the same to their children and are reluctant to pass laws forbidding spanking. In Britain such a law was not passed until 1986, and I see this delay as one of the effects of child abuse there.

The ignorance of our society is the result of child abuse. We were spanked in order to become blind like Oedipus. We have to become seeing in order to give our children the chance to grow up with more responsibility and more awareness than was available for our generation now producing atomic bombs.